

better able to see how children's perception of the characteristics of a program are related to their eagerness to see it.

### **How Well Do MPAA Ratings Distinguish the Content of Movies?**

There is one further aspect of the research conducted in Year 1 of the National Television Violence Study that seems relevant both to the development of the new rating system and to the usefulness of ratings for parents. That aspect relates to the degree to which MPAA ratings consistently reflect the amount and type of controversial content present in a movie. MPAA ratings have sometimes been criticized for being summary judgments, and for not communicating the specific content that prompted a particular rating.

One way to determine how well MPAA ratings correspond with various forms of content is to look at the movies that appeared on television in the Year 1 sample of the NTVS research. Although we have not yet related the actual violent content of movies to their MPAA ratings, our approach here was to look at those movies that displayed MPAA ratings and were evaluated according to the content codes currently being employed by the three premium channels in the sample (HBO, Cinemax, and Showtime). These codes include notations for adult content, nudity, violence, and language. The codes are assigned by the channel showing the movie, and presumably reflect what personnel employed by the channel perceive to exist in the film.

In the Year 1 sample, we identified 188 movies that displayed an MPAA rating and appeared on one of the three premium channels. Figures 9a through 9d display how a movie's MPAA rating related to its assignment to content codes by the channel showing it. Only 12 movies in the sample were rated "G," and as can be seen from the figure, only one of these (8%) displayed any of the content codes. Specifically, one "G"-rated movie contained "mild violence." Looking at the high end of the MPAA system, in contrast, the 38 "R"-rated movies in the sample contained a great deal of controversial content. Eighty-five or more percent of these movies displayed codes indicating adult content, violence, and language, and 61% displayed a nudity code. Further analysis of these codes revealed that 50% of the "R"-rated movies contained codes indicating content in all four areas.

**Insert Figures 9a through 9d about here.**

Whereas these content codes suggest that the MPAA ratings of "G" and "R" were well warranted by the movies' contents (as viewed by the premium channel personnel), the content codes for "PG" and "PG-13" suggest a great deal of overlap between these two rating levels ( $N=68$ , and 70, respectively). According to the figure, the levels of "PG" and "PG-13" are somewhat distinguishable in terms of content related to sexuality (47% vs. 62%, respectively, for adult content), but not in terms of violence or language. The percentage of movies with adult language is actually slightly smaller for "PG-13" than for "PG" (76% vs. 80%, respectively). Moreover, the same percentage of "PG" and "PG-13" movies contained violence codes (62%), with the only difference being a shift of

7% of movies from the “mild violence” to the “violence” category when moving from “PG” to “PG-13.”

What this means is that for 138, or 73% of the movies in the sample, the MPAA ratings of “PG” and “PG-13” signal virtually the same probability of encountering violence and adult language. This suggests that these ratings are perhaps somewhat helpful for parents interested in shielding their child from sexual content, but not for those interested in protecting their child from violence or offensive language.

It must be taken into account, however, that the “PG-13” rating was not introduced until 1984. It is possible, therefore, that the enormous overlap between “PG” and “PG-13” in our sample was due to the presence of a large number of “PG”-rated movies that were produced before the “PG-13” rating was available. In order to test this possibility, we re-ran the same analyses, limiting the sample to movies that came out in 1984 or later. Figures 10a through 10c present these analyses.

**Insert Figures 10a through 10c about here.**

These analyses revealed that only six of the 12 “G”-rated movies in the original sample were from 1984 or after. None of these were associated with any of the content codes for adult content, nudity, violence, or language. Figures 10a, 10b, and 10c show how “PG,” “PG-13,” and “R”-rated post-1983 movies in the sample related to their assignment to content codes. The first thing to notice is that elimination of the pre-1984 films reduced the sample of “PG”-rated movies from 68 to 32. Therefore, more than half of the “PG”-rated movies in the original sample were produced before the MPAA system

made a distinction between “PG” and “PG-13.” By definition, none of the “PG-13” movies in the sample were eliminated in this second analysis, because this rating did not exist until 1984. Finally, only four of the “R”-rated movies in the sample were released before 1984. This left 34 such movies in the post-1983 sample.

Figures 10a and 10b reveal that “PG” and “PG-13” movies were somewhat better differentiated in the post-1983 period. Although these two ratings are still not distinguishable in terms of language content (with “PG” again slightly exceeding “PG-13” in adult language), a slightly higher portion of “PG-13” than “PG” movies had violence codes, and “PG-13” had a heavier weighting of “V=Violence” relative to “MV=Mild Violence.” One important problem that is brought to light by this analysis, however, is that parents need to be informed that the “PG” rating must be interpreted in conjunction with the date of a movie’s release. Any parent who feels comfortable with “PG,” but not “PG-13”-rated movies, should be warned that this level of comfort should extend only to movies issued after 1983.

A more basic problem with MPAA ratings is that they do not specify which type of content led to the movie’s assignment to a particular rating. A parent who is concerned with violence but not language, for example, cannot tell from the rating itself whether the movie received its rating because of one or both or neither of these types of content.

To determine the frequency with which the various MPAA ratings were associated with language, violence, and sex, alone or in various combinations, we conducted a

further analysis. For the sake of simplicity, we combined the “adult content” and “nudity” codes into a single category suggesting sexual content. We then determined, for each MPAA rating, what percentage of the post-1983 movies in the sample contained each of these three types of content and all possible combinations thereof.

**Insert Figures 11a through 11c about here.**

Figures 11a through 11c show these distributions for the movies rated “PG,” “PG-13,” and “R” in the post-1983 sample. As can be seen from Figure 11a, 22% of “PG”-rated movies contained language only, 6% contained sex only, and 13% contained violence only. Another 22% contained only language and sex, and 28% contained only language and violence. Clearly, there are many possible combinations of potentially problematic material that could be represented by a “PG” rating. Therefore a mother, for example, who is largely concerned about violence only or sex only, and is unconcerned about language, is not given specific enough information to make a viewing decision for her child. And given the paucity of “G”-rated movies, this puts her in a difficult position regarding the availability of suitable movies on television.

The variety of content combinations represented by the “PG-13” rating are shown in Figure 10b. Only with the “R” rating, shown in Figure 10c, is the doubt minimized, since almost 80% of these movies contained the three forms of objectionable content: sex, violence, and language.

This analysis highlights the importance of developing a rating system that would provide specific information about different types of content. National surveys conducted

in the fall of 1996 show that parents are aware of the problems associated with age-based ratings and strongly prefer ratings that provide them with specific information about the content of each program (Cantor, Stutman, & Duran, 1996; Silver & Geier, 1966).

## **Implications and Recommendations**

### Advice to Parents

Our findings have some direct implications for parents as they struggle with the problem of protecting their children from exposure to inappropriate television content. One is that the process of parental guidance of children's television viewing is perilous and paradoxical. Conscientious parents, who want to protect their children, need to recognize the potential hazards of imposing restrictions. Saying that something is forbidden may pique the interest of some children. One solution to this problem would be to use the V-chip when it becomes available. This device could potentially block out programs without actively calling the child's attention to the program being censored. This approach will have obvious limitations, however, especially when dealing with children who are highly motivated to circumvent the restrictions, and who may well have more technological savvy than their parents.

Another approach might be to involve the child somehow in the decision-making process, making the restriction seem more like a consensual judgment than an edict delivered from "on high." The fact that "viewer discretion advised," an admonition that leaves it to the viewers themselves, did not serve as a magnet suggests that involving

children in decision-making might make them feel less controlled by the parent and less motivated to rebel against the restrictions.

The findings with regard to parental involvement in children's viewing seem relevant in this regard as well. It will be recalled that children who rated their parents as more involved in their television viewing were less likely than others to choose programs with advisories and movies with more restrictive ratings. Perhaps this parental involvement makes the purpose behind ratings and advisories more understandable and more acceptable to the child.

Finally, parents need to be reminded that the television industry has said that the new rating system is subject to modification if parents do not find it useful. It is hoped that parents will make their voices heard and insist that the rating system that is ultimately adopted provide them with useful information in the manner least likely to attract their children to inappropriate content.

### Implications for the New Rating System

The findings of this research have direct implications for the formulation and evaluation of a rating system for television content.

#### **1. Effects on children's interest in programs must be taken into consideration.**

This research has clearly demonstrated that ratings and advisories are not for parents only. Ratings and advisories that are available to children have the potential to affect their interest in programs. In some cases, the labels will have their intended effects of

discouraging viewing, while in others, they will serve as a magnet for a larger child audience.

**2. Different forms of ratings and advisories have different effects.** Some advisories are more “magnetic” than others. “Parental discretion advised” served as a magnet for boys and especially older boys, but “viewer discretion advised” did not. The MPAA rating of “PG-13” attracted viewers in all groups but the younger girls, and “R” attracted the older boys. Some labels may be more tactful than others. “Parental discretion advised,” while appearing euphemistic to an adult, may be received as a challenge or a lure to a teenage boy.

On the other hand, some advisories have their intended effects on some viewers. In our study, “viewer discretion advised” was used sensibly by girls, especially younger girls, and both types of advisories were used by children who had earlier been upset by television, to avoid programming that they had reason to be wary of.

**3. The evidence for “forbidden fruit” theory was stronger than that for the information-based rationale.** The reason for the magnetic effect of “parental discretion advised” and not of “viewer discretion advised” was best explained by the reactance notion. Although “parental discretion advised” conveyed perceptions of less violent content than “viewer discretion advised,” it made the programming more attractive to boys, presumably because it implied stronger attempts at parental control.

**4. The new rating system for television seems likely to engender the same “forbidden fruit” effect that the MPAA rating system produced in our studies.** Like the MPAA system, the “TV Parental Guidelines” make recommendations that children of



different ages be shielded from viewing, and use phrases such as “parental guidance suggested” and “parents strongly cautioned” that emphasize the parents’ role.

**5. MPAA ratings have developed a reputation with children, and it is not unreasonable to expect that this reputation will generalize to the similar new television system.** Many children have come to believe, as one child in our study did, that “the cooler the movie, the higher the rating.” Given the attitudes of many children, it is perhaps not surprising that so few “G”-rated movies were found in the NTVS sample. Moreover, a “TV-14” or “TV-M” rating (the equivalents of the MPAA’s “PG-13” and “R,” respectively) might be actively sought out by advertisers, especially those who are seeking an audience of teenage males.

**6. Another problem with MPAA ratings (and TV Parental Guidelines) is that you cannot tell what is in the show from the rating.** These ratings are summary judgments that represent evaluations of a show’s content in terms of language, violence, or sex, among other things. So when a parent sees a “PG” rating for a movie, or a “TV-PG” rating for a program, he or she does not know if that rating was assigned because of language, violence, sex, or a combination of some or all of these. Our analysis of the NTVS sample of movies revealed that “PG” and “PG-13” movies have considerable overlap in contents. Moreover, the levels “PG” and “PG-13” each contain a variety of combinations of potentially objectionable content that different parents might feel are differentially offensive.

**7. These data strongly support the recommendation that a TV rating system stress content rather than who should or should not see a program.** This

recommendation is based on the expectations that content-based ratings will prove to make the labeled programs less attractive than age-based ratings and that they will communicate better with parents. As mentioned earlier, this choice is also consistent with the preferences of parents (Cantor et al, 1996; Silver & Geier, 1996).

**8. Another reason why content-based labels are recommended is that they are less prone to the “eye-of-the-beholder,” phenomenon.** What is “TV-14” to the producer of one program might be “TV-PG” or “TV-M” to another. But producers and viewers should be less likely to disagree on whether or not a murder or a rape, for example, occurred in the program. In one of the national surveys mentioned earlier, parents rated the content based-system employed by HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax as significantly more objective than the age-based MPAA ratings (Cantor et al., 1996).

**9. Most importantly, any rating system for television must be designed to meet parents’ desires and needs.** The sole purpose of the new rating system is to help parents shield their children from content they do not wish them to be exposed to. There is no point in having a rating system that does not serve the purpose for which it was intended. It would be sadly ironic if we ended up with a system that makes parenting even harder than it is now.

## References

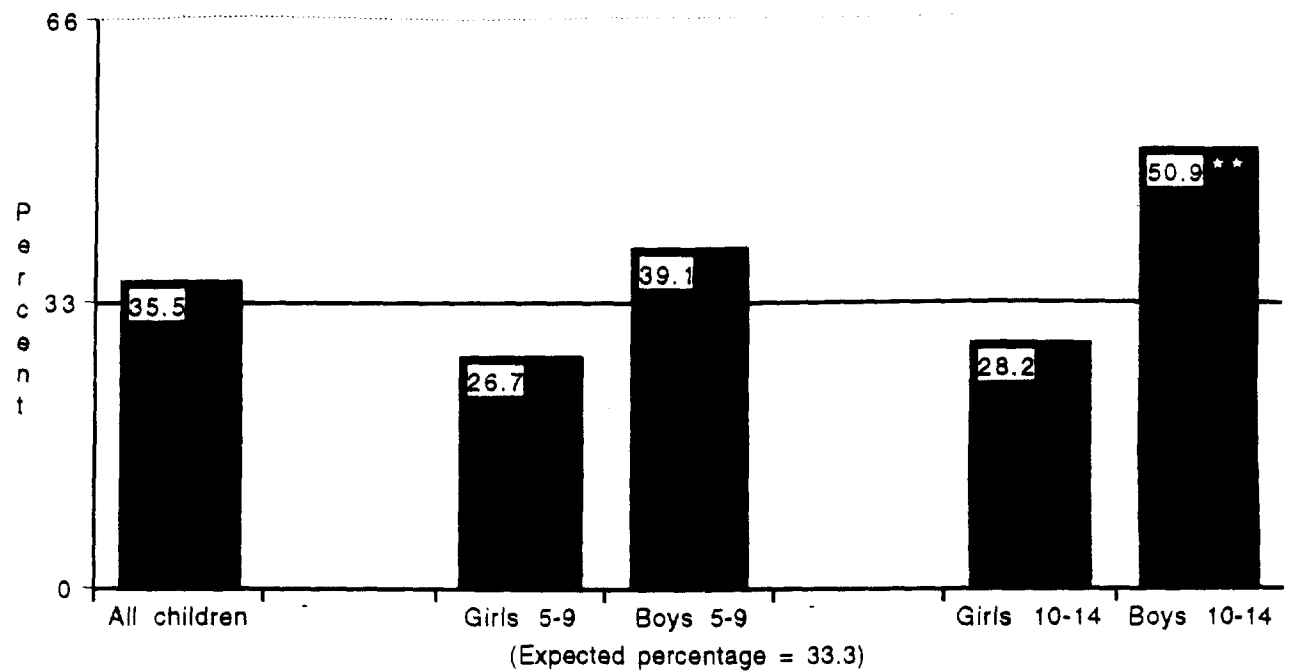
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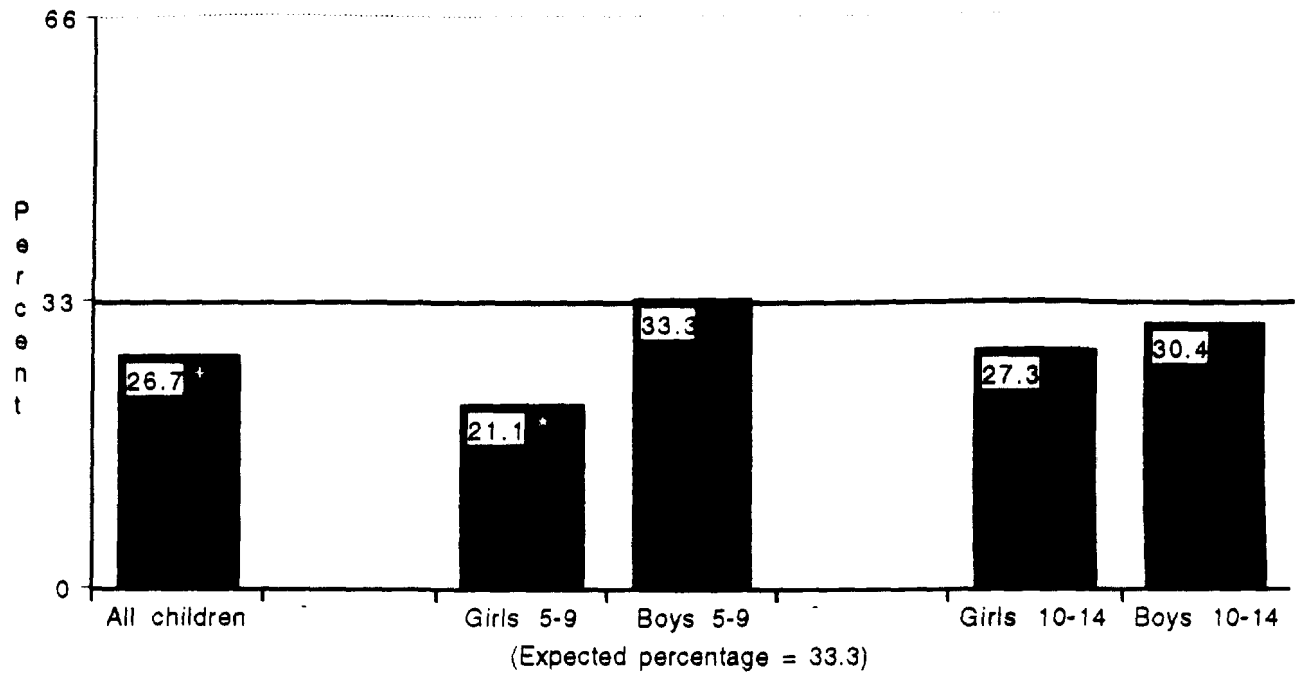
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Fig. 1: Percentage of Children Choosing Program with PARENTAL Advisory



NOTE: \*\*  $p < .01$

Fig. 2: Percentage of Children Choosing Program with VIEWER Advisory



NOTE: \*  $p < .05$     +  $p < .07$

Fig. 3a: Percent of Younger Girls (Ages 5-9) Choosing Target Movie

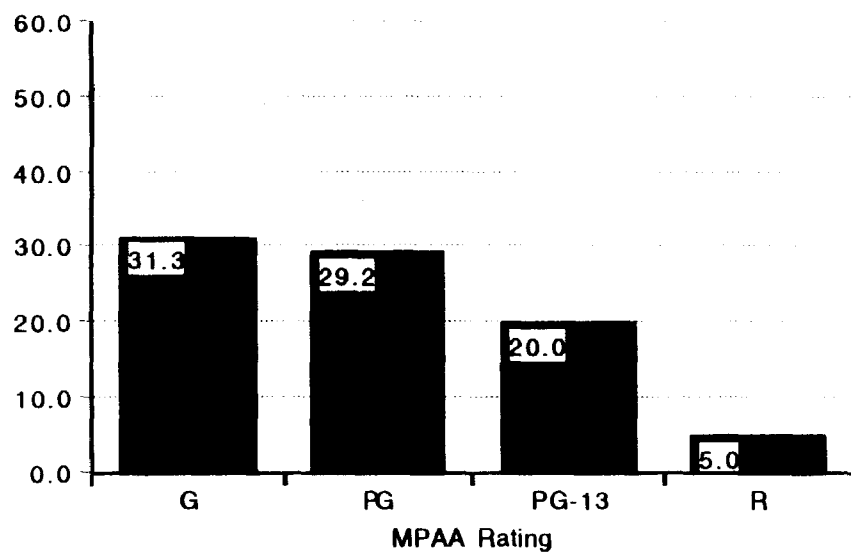


Fig. 3b: Percent of Younger Boys (Ages 5-9) Choosing Target Movie

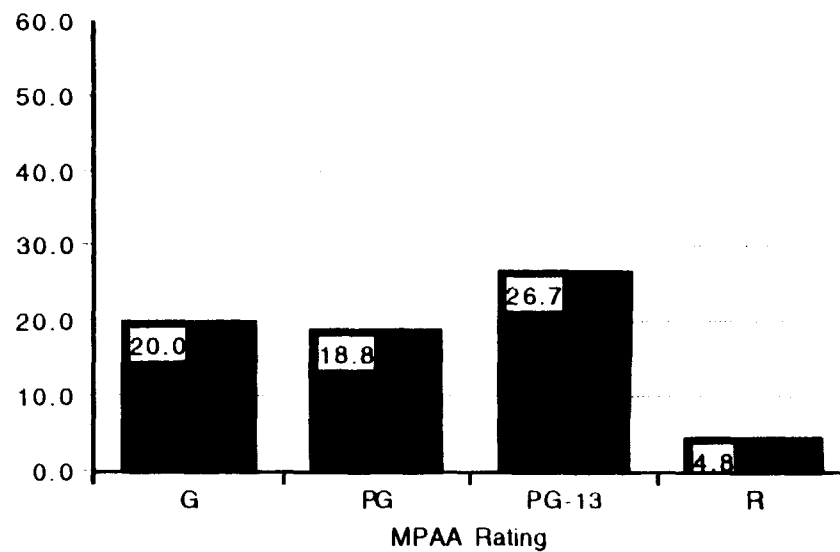


Fig. 3c: Percent of Older Girls (Ages 10-14) Choosing Target Movie

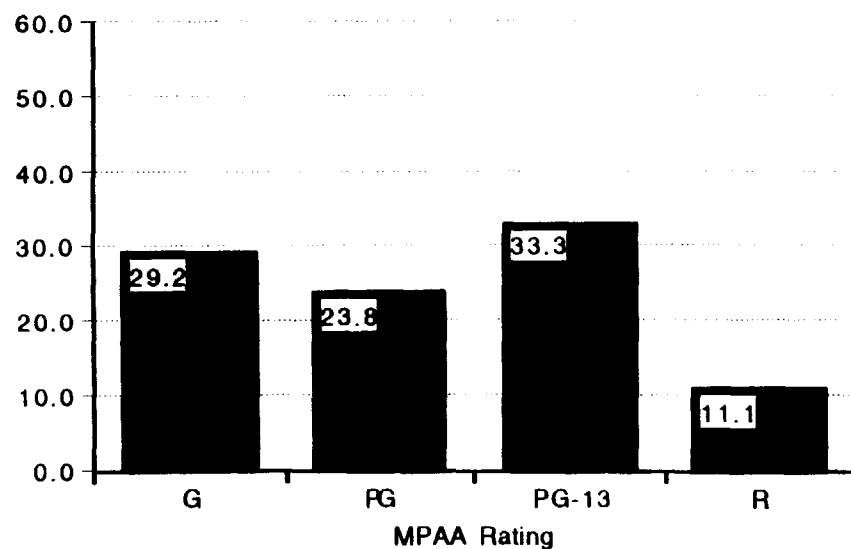


Fig. 3d: Percent of Older Boys (Ages 10-14) Choosing Target Movie\*

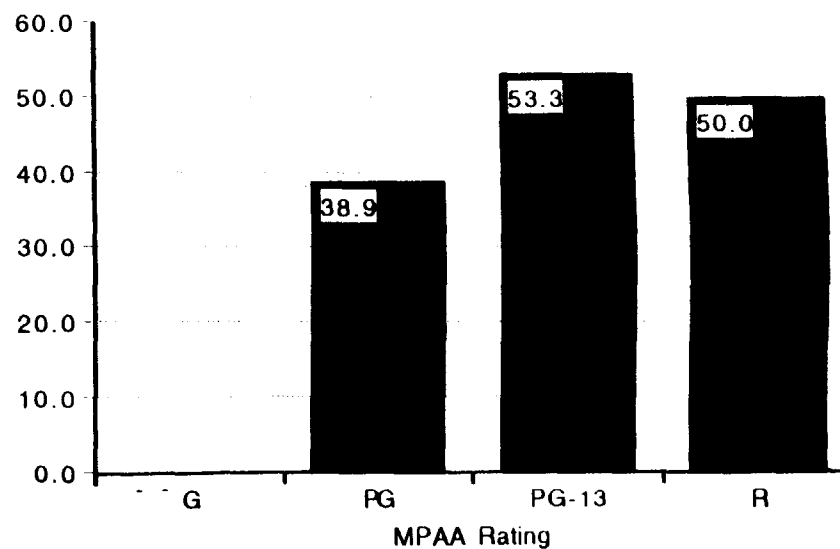
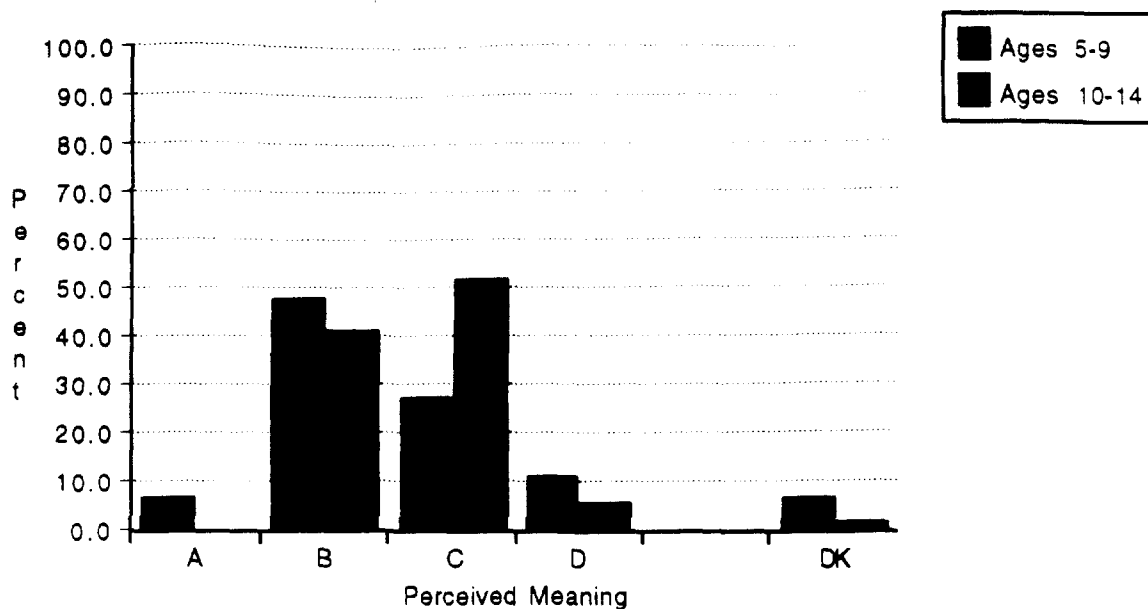
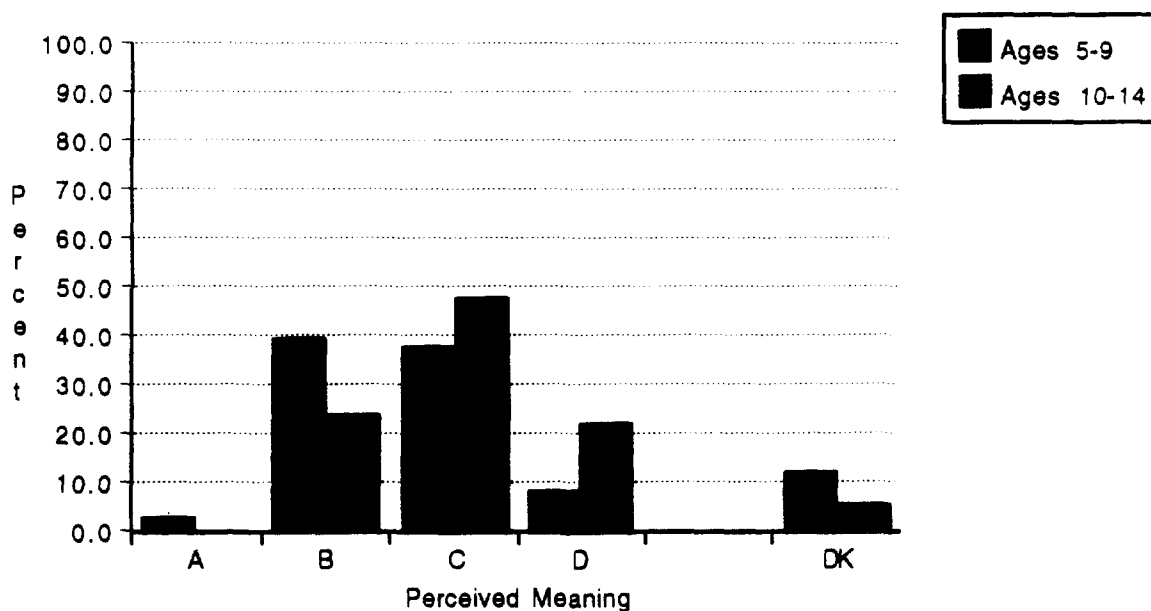


Fig. 4a: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of "Parental Discretion Advised" \*



NOTE: \*Patterns for age groups significantly different at the  $p < .05$  level.

Fig. 4b: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of "Viewer Discretion Advised" \*



NOTE: \*Patterns for age groups significantly different at the  $p < .05$  level.

PERCEIVED MEANING KEY:

- A -- People shouldn't watch
- B -- Kids need a grownup's permission to watch
- C -- Parents should be careful in deciding whether to let their kids watch
- D -- People should be careful in deciding whether to watch
- DK -- Don't know



Fig. 5a: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of MPAA Rating "G" \*\*

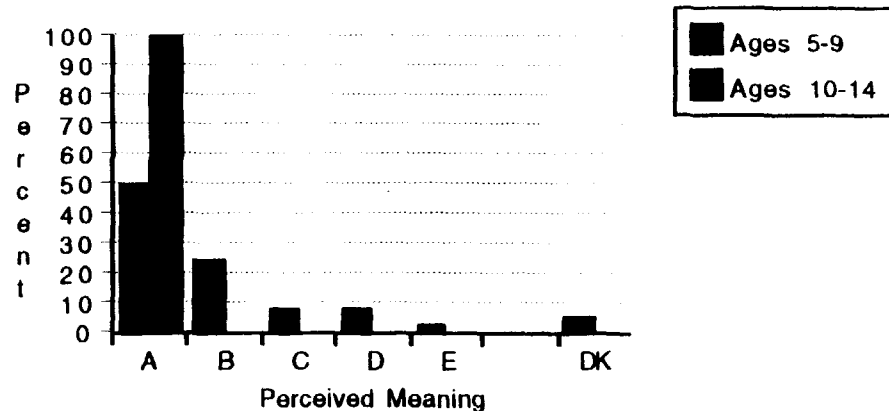


Fig. 5b: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of MPAA Rating "PG"

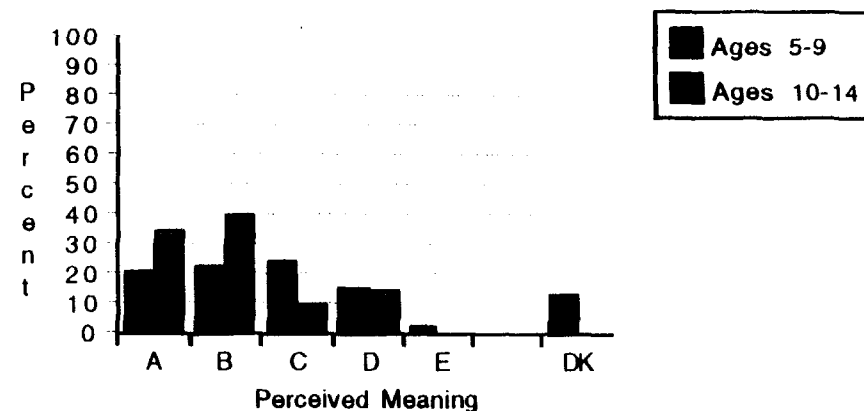


Fig. 5c: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of MPAA Rating "PG-13" \*

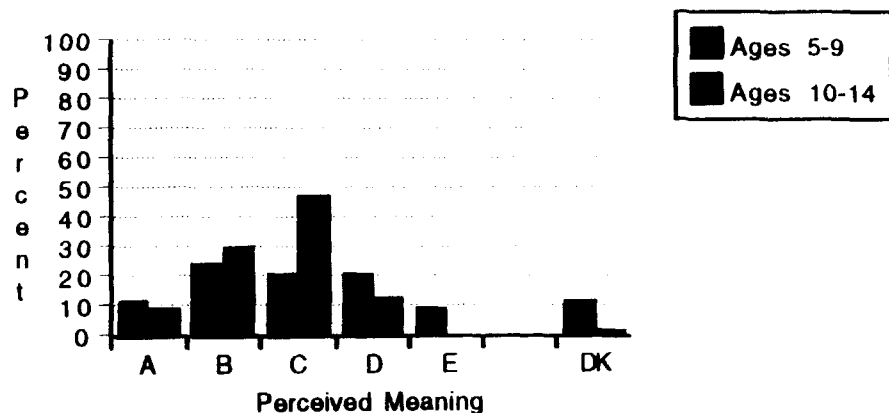
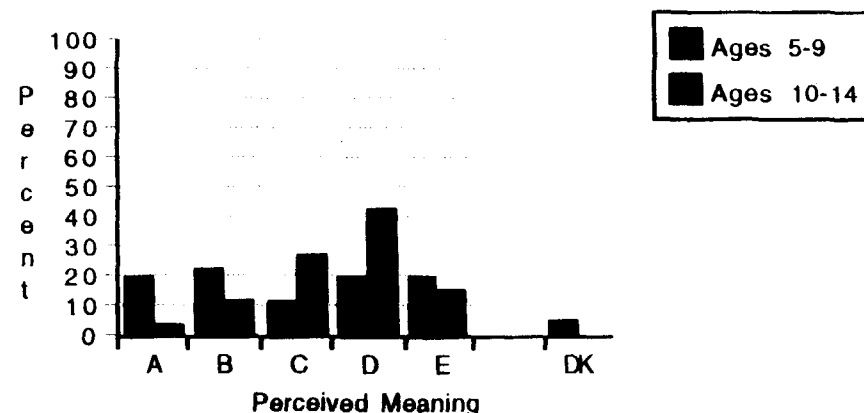


Fig. 5d: Children's Perceptions of the Meaning of MPAA Rating "R" \*

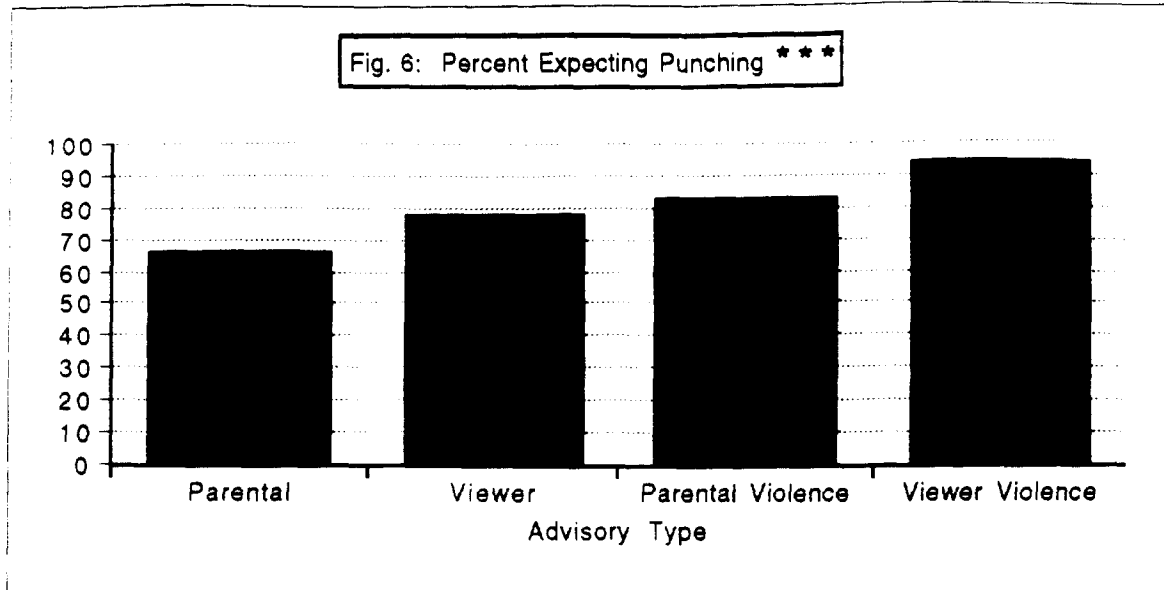


NOTE: \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  +  $p < .10$   
for younger versus older group comparisons.

PERCEIVED MEANING KEY:

- A -- Anyone can watch
- B -- Parents should decide whether their kids can watch
- C -- Parents should be very careful about letting their kids watch
- D -- Kids shouldn't watch without a parent
- E -- No kids are allowed to watch
- DK -- Don't know

Children's Expectations of Specific Violent Content in Programs with Advisories



NOTE: \*\*\*  $p < .001$

ADVISORY TYPE KEY:

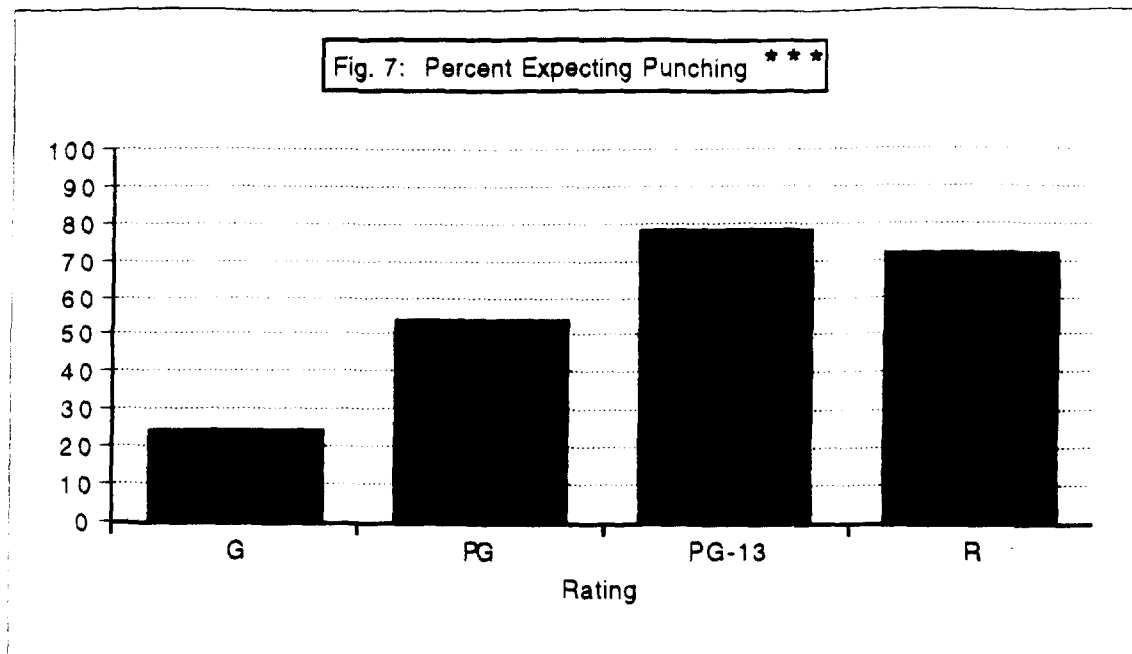
Parental -- "Parental discretion advised"

Viewer -- "Viewer discretion advised"

Parental Violence -- "Contains some violent content; parental discretion advised"

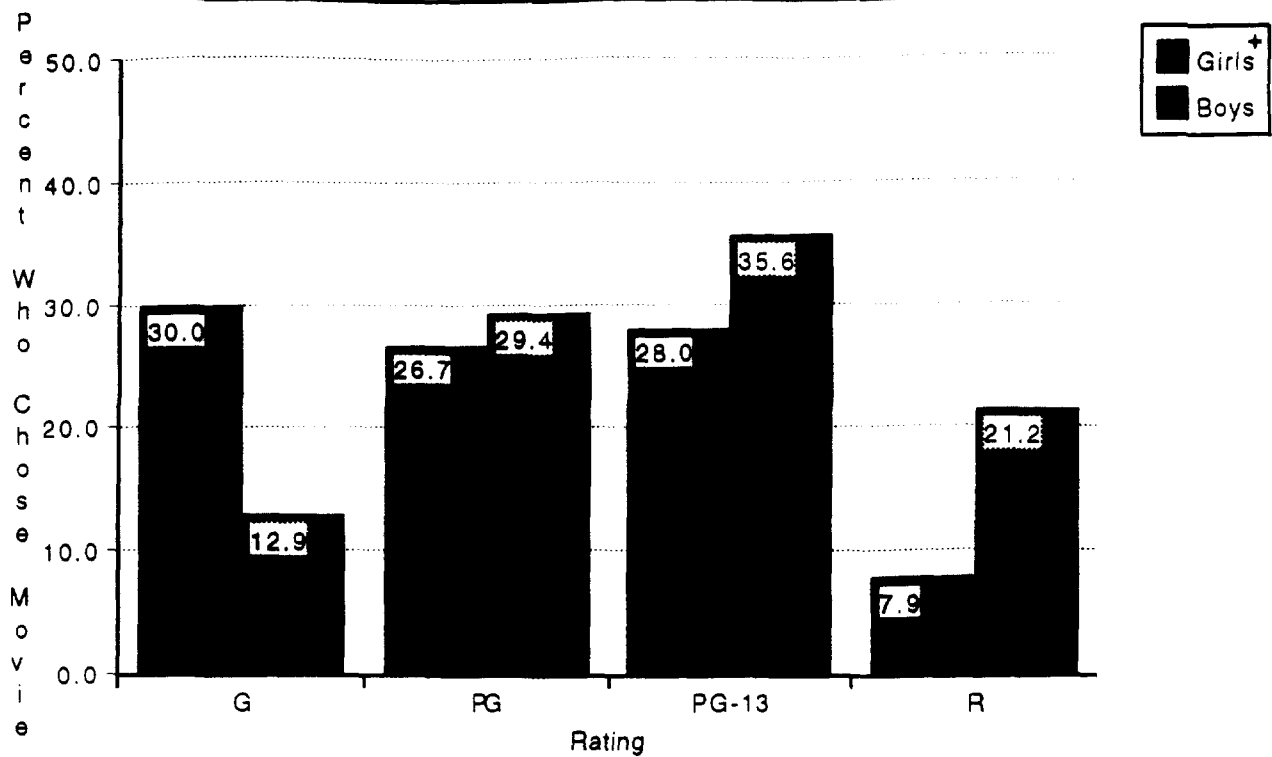
Viewer Violence -- "Contains some violent content; viewer discretion advised"

Children's Expectations of Specific Violent Content in Movies with MPAA Ratings



NOTE: \*\*\*  $p < .001$

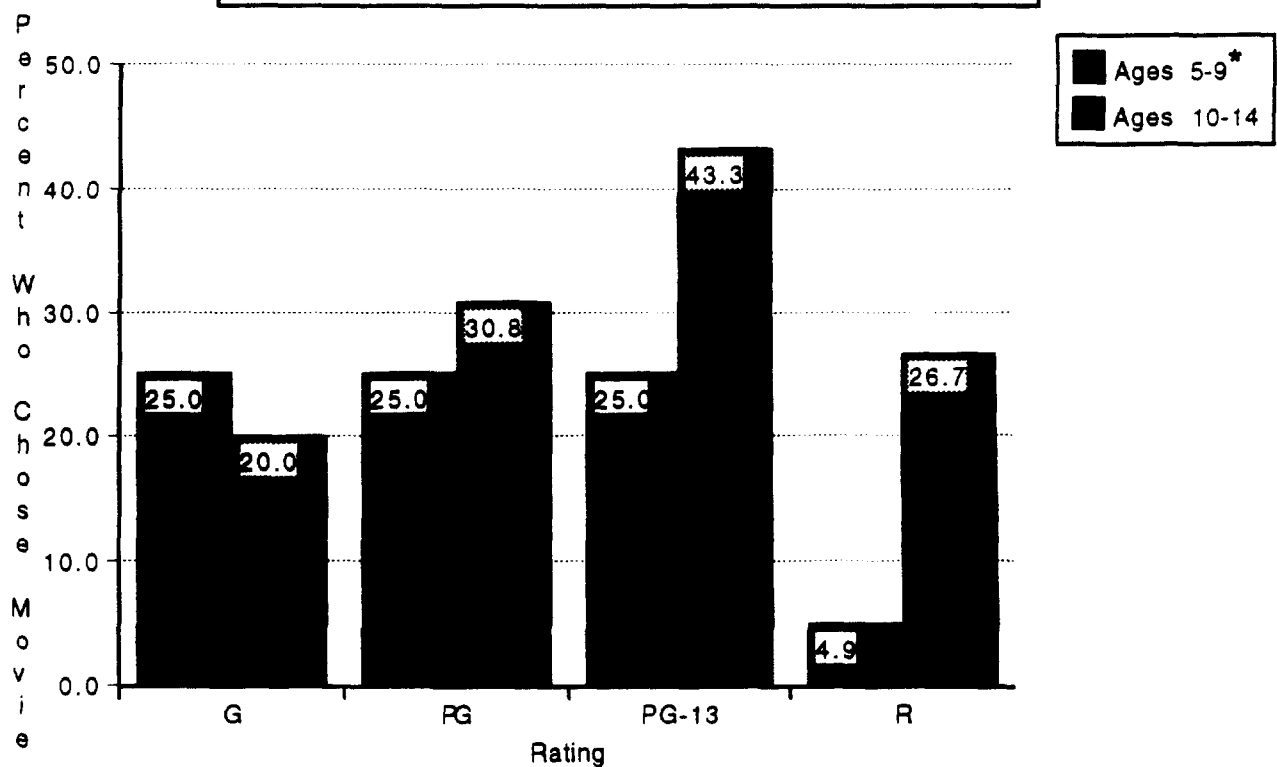
Fig. 8a: Choice of Target Movie Based on MPAA Rating -- By Gender



NOTE: \*  $p < .08$

For girls versus boys,  $p < .01$ .

Fig. 8b: Choice of Target Movie Based on MPAA Rating -- By Age

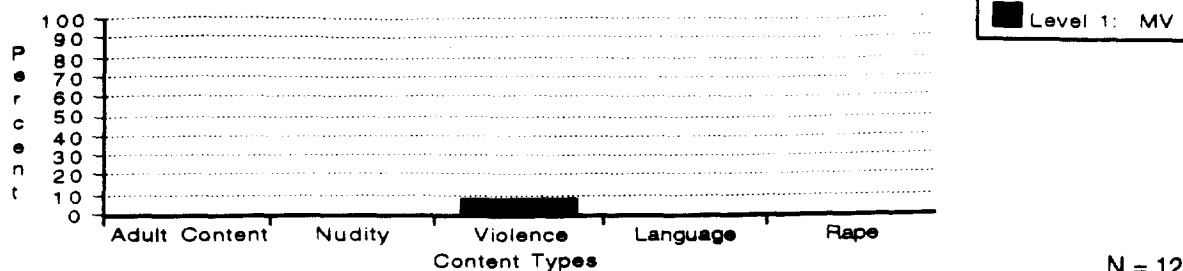


NOTE: \*  $p < .05$

For younger versus older groups,  $p < .01$ .

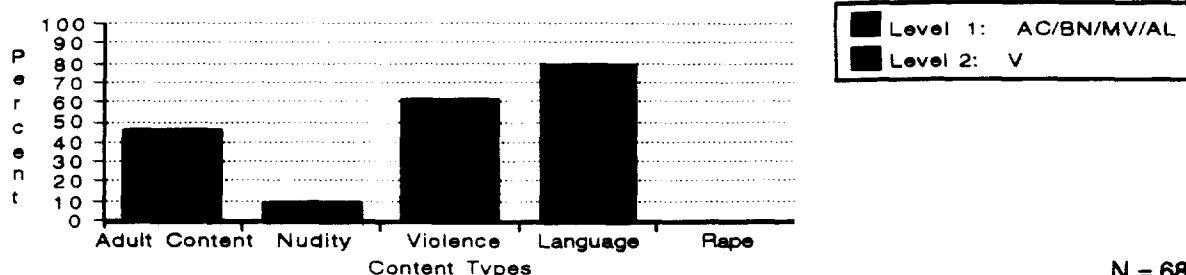
# Relationship of MPAA Ratings to Content Codes -- Year 1 NTVS Sample

Fig. 9a: Percent of G Rated Movies Having Each Content Code



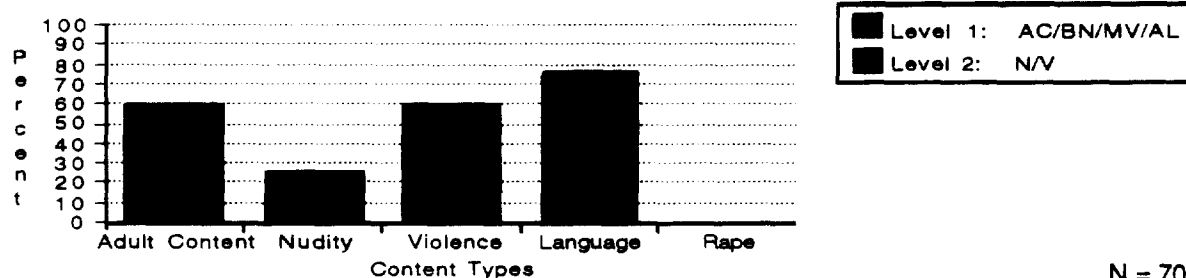
N = 12

Fig. 9b: Percent of PG Rated Movies Having Each Content Code



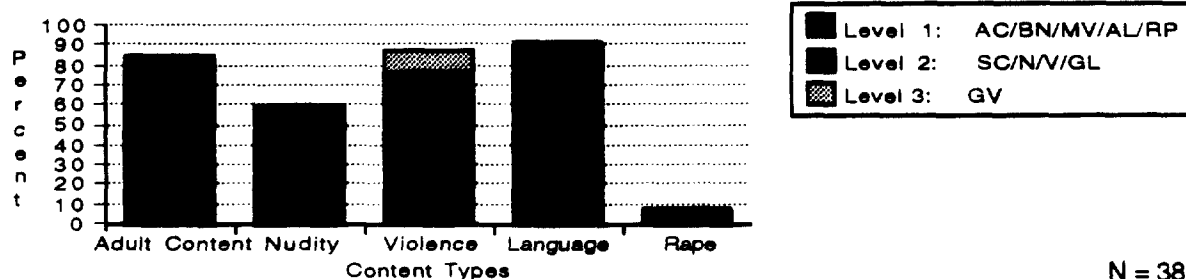
N = 68

Fig. 9c: Percent of PG-13 Rated Movies Having Each Content Code



N = 70

Fig. 9d: Percent of R Rated Movies Having Each Content Code



N = 38

KEY: Adult Content Codes: AC = Adult Content, SC = Strong Sexual Content  
 Nudity Codes: BN = Brief Nudity, N = Nudity  
 Violence Codes: MV = Mild Violence, V = Violence, GV = Graphic Violence  
 Language Codes: AL = Adult Language, GL = Graphic Language

# Relationship of MPAA Ratings to Content Codes -- Post-1983 NTVS Sample

Fig. 10a: Percent of PG Rated Movies Having Each Content Code

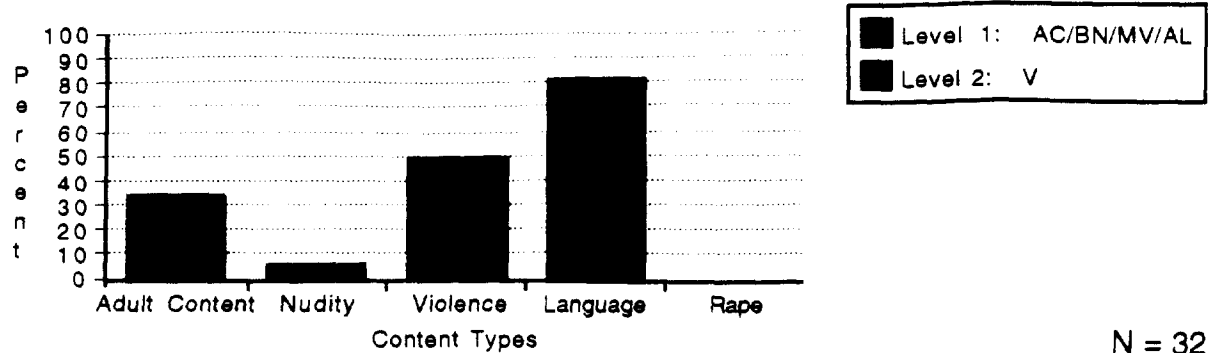


Fig. 10b: Percent of PG-13 Rated Movies Having Each Content Code

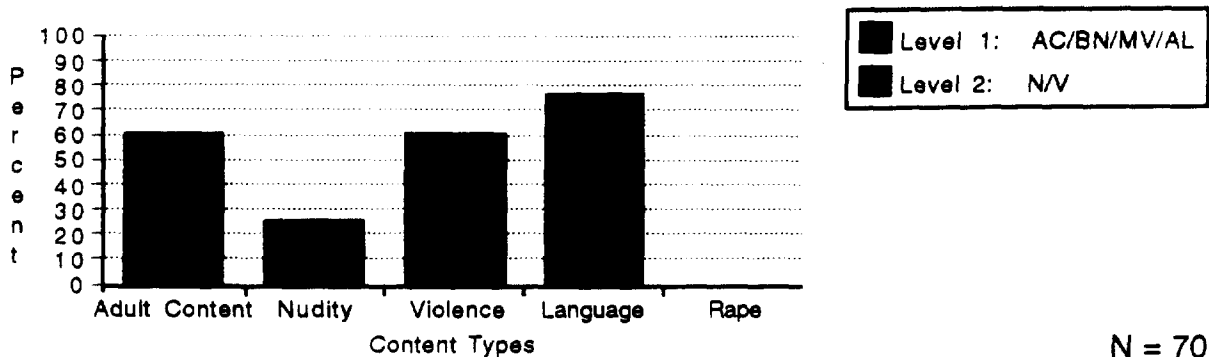
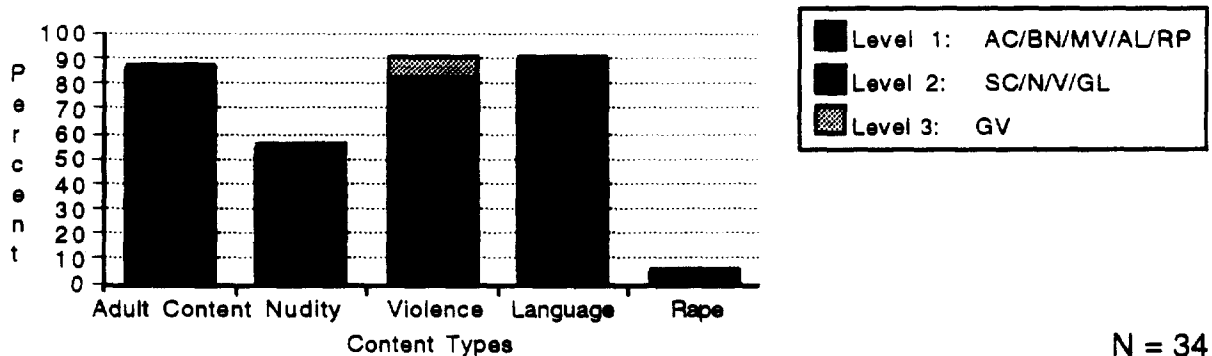


Fig. 10c: Percent of R Rated Movies Having Each Content Code



**Note.** None of the post-1983 "G" rated movies (n = 6) contained any of the above content codes. All "PG-13" rated movies were made in 1984 or later.

Distribution of Content Codes in MPAA-Rated Movies in Post-1983 NTVS Sample

Fig. 11a: Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence in PG Rated Movies (N=32)

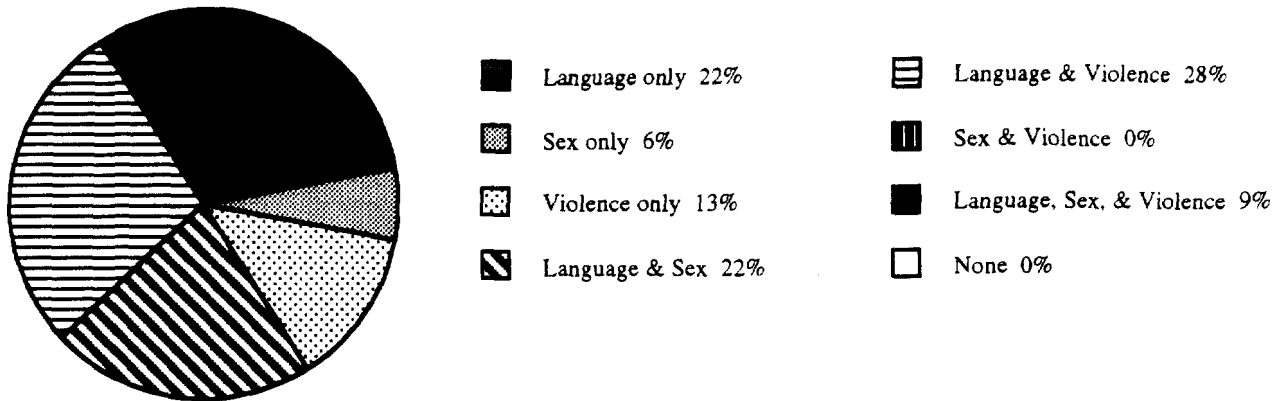


Fig. 11b: Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence in PG-13 Rated Movies (N=70)



Fig. 11c: Distribution of Language, Sex, & Violence in R Rated Movies (N=34)

